

The Baba of Melaka

Culture and Identity of a
Chinese Peranakan Community in Malaysia.



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Preface

This study of the Baba in Melaka was an exciting experience for the author who knew almost nothing about these people before the research. In fact, most people in Malaysia, and for that matter even the students of Chinese societies, know very little about the Baba even though they may be familiar with the label. While there have been some general reports and publications on the Baba, the ethnography of the present-day Baba is still rather lacking. It is hoped that this study will enable more people to understand the Baba and their culture, and contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of Baba identity.

This book is the outcome of the revision of my thesis presented in 1979 to the Department of Anthropology, Cornell University in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The fieldwork for the original research was undertaken throughout the year 1977. I am grateful to the Culture Learning Institute of the East West Center for sponsoring the major part of the research under the Joint Doctoral Intern Award. I also thank the Center for International Studies at Cornell University for a small grant which helped to meet my field expenses. Two small grants provided by the University of Malaya enabled me to do further research in Melaka in 1982 and 1985, and for which, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude here.

I am most grateful to all my Baba informants and many other people who have helped me to make this study a success. I would like to register my utmost gratitude to Mr. Chu Lian Hoe and his family in Bukit Rambai, for kindly allowing me to stay with them throughout the year of my field research in Melaka in 1977. I am grateful to them for their understanding, hospitality and assistance.

I stayed at the home of the late Mr. Tan Koon Kim of Jalan Bandar Hilir in Melaka Town for about two months, and I thank

his wife, son, and daughter for their hospitality. The late Mr. Tan was then suffering from illness, but we became good friends. I am also grateful to the late Mr. Tan Hock Lin who helped in establishing contact with the Baba in Melaka Town. Mr. Tan was then the Secretary of the Straits Chinese British Association. He passed away rather unexpectedly in November 1977.

It is impossible to mention the names of all my Baba friends who have helped me in one way or another. Nevertheless a few other names which I would like to mention are Mr. Boon Kim Geok of Lorong Pandan, Mr. Cheong Sian Chiang and family of Kandang, Mr. Kang Teck Hoe of Ujong Pasir, and Mr. Yeo Kim Swee of Jalan Tengker. In Singapore, my wife and I have always enjoyed the hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Gwee Thian Hock, and we register our gratitude here.

I am most grateful to Professor Donald R. DeGlopper, Professor Bernd Lambert, Professor A. Thomas Kirsch, Professor Robert J. Smith and Professor Milton L. Barnett for their advice and guidance while I was at Cornell University. Dr. Anthony R. Walker of the Dept. of Sociology, National University of Singapore, gave me some useful comment on my dissertation, and I am grateful too. My wife Swee Hiang has accompanied me on a number of field trips since 1980 and she has been very supportive of my work too.

In the last few years I have written some papers on the Baba. Although I have not reproduced in full any of the papers here, I have used some of the material which have already been published in the following journals, as indicated in the relevant sections in Chapter 2, Chapter 4 and Chapter 7: *Manusia dan Masyarakat (Man and Society)*, vol. 3, 1982; *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (Tokyo), no. 22, 1981; *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 7, 1979; and *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography*, no. 3, 1984. I thank the Board of Editors of these journals for permission to use the material.

Technical Notes

As far as possible I transcribe Baba Malay words according to the system of Bahasa Malaysia (Standard Malay).

In Bahasa Malaysia, the /ə/ and /e/ vowels are transcribed as "e". I use "e" for /ə/ and "e" for /e/ in Baba Malay so that

the readers will have a better idea of the actual Baba pronunciation. The transcription of “ê” for /e/ is made at the first instance and wherever necessary, but not for words which are pronounced in the same way in both Bahasa Malaysia and Baba Malay. For example the word *teh* (/teh/) for “tea” is pronounced in the same way in both Bahasa Malaysia and Baba Malay and is spelled as such. However, the Standard Malay word *malas* for “lazy” is written as *malé* in Baba Malay.

Baba Malay has many Chinese loanwords and the following adjustments are made for the transcription of Chinese loanwords in Baba Malay. First, the letter “n” printed higher on the top right side of a word means that the word is pronounced with a nasal sound, such as the word *thiaⁿ* for “hall”. Second, the /ɔ/ vowel is indicated by a full stop to the top right of the letter “o”, such as the word *kongco^o* for “great grandfather”. Third, while “c” is a transcription of /tʃ/ in Bahasa Malaysia, in Baba Malay “c” is unaspirated and “c” is aspirated, as in the word *cciaⁿ* which means “to invite”. Fourth, hyphens are used in some Chinese loanwords either because the transcription without the hyphen will not conform to the Malay system of orthography or a hyphen is necessary to indicate separate syllables. For example, the hyphen in *ma-m* (“father’s elder brother’s wife”) is obviously necessary for otherwise it has to be pronounced in one syllable as *mam*.

In this work, Hokkien words are transcribed according to the system used by Chiang (c. 1940). Chiang’s English-Hokkien dictionary is based on the Hokkien language in Malaysia and Singapore. The tones are marked for Hokkien words in the appendix only. These tones are indicated by the following tone markers: first tone, upper even (unmarked); second tone, upper (/); third tone, upper departing (\); fourth tone, upper entering (unmarked); fifth tone, lower even (^); sixth tone, upper (/); seventh tone, lower departing (-) and eighth tone, lower entering (').

Mandarin words are transcribed according to the modern Pinyin system. Proper names, such as names of deities, are transcribed according to the popular usage in Malaysia and Singapore. The vernacular names of deities and festivals are italicized only in the first instance.